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Afghans Use U.S. Missiles

Stingers Providing Antiaircraft Defense

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PESHAWAR, Pakistan—Afghan guerrillas have begun using U.S.-made Stinger missiles to shoot down Soviet helicopters and jets, according to guerrilla commanders and western military observers.

The Stingers' deployment, which apparently began in October, has forced Soviet and Afghan government forces to reduce air operations in parts of eastern Afghanistan, the sources said.

Diplomatic analysts in Islamabad suggested that the increased pressure on the Soviet military may be one factor helping to push Moscow toward considering a possible negotiated settlement of its war with the guerrillas, called *mujaheddin*.

One guerrilla commander interviewed here said the guerrillas were shooting down aircraft in about 70 percent of their attempts with the missile. He said his own unit, based near the capital, Kabul, had shot down two helicopters and three transport planes with the seven missiles it had fired.

The commander said he believed that 90 to 100 Soviet or Afghan government aircraft had been brought down by the missiles so far. Afghans independent of the resistance groups who monitor the war have reported increased numbers of aircraft shot down in Afghanistan since October, but have only recently had eyewitness reports of the Stingers' effectiveness.

The State Department last month said the guerrillas were downing more aircraft, but refused comment on what weapons were responsible or whether Stingers were being supplied to the rebels via a widely reported U.S. arms pipeline through Pakistan. Afghan

government officials this month showed western journalists a Stinger it said it had captured from a resistance group in western Afghanistan.

According to westerners who have traveled in Afghanistan, only selected rebel groups are being supplied limited numbers of missiles, and only after disciplined mujaheddin are trained how to use the complex weapon.

For years, a lack of effective defenses against Soviet aircraft has been the mujaheddin's greatest complaint. In most of Afghanistan, the guerrillas have relied on heavy machine guns or even rocket-propelled grenades, an antitank weapon, which have been largely ineffective.

Interviews with mujaheddin here this past week indicate that the Stingers are proving effective where they are in use—mostly around the eastern cities of Kabul and Jalalabad—but that the Soviets are still able to exercise their air superiority. One guerrilla said an attack near Jalalabad on Jan. 16 met with an immediate, heavy response by Soviet aircraft.

Reports last spring said the Reagan administration had decided to supply the missiles to the guerrillas, but they apparently were withdrawn quickly. There were varying reports that the initial shipments proved ineffective because of improper training or mechanical faults—or that Islamabad held up the supplies out of fear that the Soviets might retaliate directly against Pakistan for their deployment.

The Stinger is a shoulder-fired missile that can be operated by one man. While it is heat-seeking, like earlier missiles such as the SAM7, it is believed to be less subject to diversion tactics that foil the earlier generation of missiles. It can also hit a target from the side or the front and is powerful enough to destroy even aircraft that are armored on their undersides.

Western military observers first reported getting eyewitness accounts of the Stingers being deployed in late October. One western visitor to the Jalalabad area said he saw mujaheddin carrying crates that they said contained the missiles. He said the guerrillas refused

to display or discuss the missiles because "they did not want the Soviets to know they had them until they started using them."

Because of U.S. and Pakistani pressure, "everyone here is trying to keep a lid on this," said one western military observer.

A reporter for the London Sunday Telegraph persuaded a Russian defector fighting with the mujaheddin group near Jalalabad to display a missile, and published a photograph of it in November. As a result, the commander of that group was quickly cut off from further supplies, according to the westerner who had visited the area.

One guerrilla commander said the young Stinger operator in his group had previously been effective with the older SAM7 missiles. "He treats it so carefully, always polishing it and keeping it clean. If it is wet or dusty, he will take off his own wrap and put it over the missile," the commander said.

"This has been one of the most effective things the Americans have done," he said. "They started talking about the missiles a while ago, getting the Russians all on edge, but nothing happened. Now, they suddenly are being used."

Out of respect for the missile, he said, Soviet jets and helicopters no longer linger over an attack area, but make quick entries and exits. Recent western visitors to Ningrahar Province said that, during a three week stay in the area, only seven Soviet aircraft had been seen. Other reports say that in some areas the heavily armed and armored Mi24 helicopter—which has been used with great effect by the Soviets—is now seen less often.

Although it is certain that the mujaheddin are receiving extensive training on the Stinger, details are unclear. A western visitor to Afghanistan reported one mujaheddin unit as saying its Stinger operators had attended an "American training course" at a base near Islamabad, but it was not clear whether this was a U.S.-designed program or one actually taught by Americans. The United States and Pakistan routinely deny any role in supplying or training the Afghan guerrillas.

James Rupert of The Washington Post Foreign Service contributed to this report from Washington.